

## ECOCRITICISM: EMERGING TRENDS

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### Abstract

Ages ago when man and his physical environment existed in a cordial state, they shared a symbiotic relationship but with the passage of time and in an era of burgeoning technology, man is perpetually drifting apart from his real and natural environment. Nature, as a theme of all popular forms of culture is somewhere down the line, inescapable. Sometime nature has been glorified and cherished and also at times it has been neglected. **Ecocriticism** originated as a theory in 1980s with a predominant purpose of a microscopic view of a cultural text in context to its dealing with nature. The word ‘Ecocriticism’ first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay titled ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’ in 1978.

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Nature, as a theme of all popular forms of culture is somewhere down the line, inescapable. Sometime nature has been glorified and cherished and also at times it has been neglected. Literature throngs with works dealing with representation of the natural environment, the mountains, the rivers, hills, meadows, landscape etc. Literature being the most popular form of culture has never remained unaffected by this indispensable theme of man and his physical environment, human and non- human relations. The settings of place, environment and overall ambience are represented meticulously by writers in their works of literature to bring different and desired effect. Literature of all periods deal with the theme of nature differently, like in England, the Age of Romanticism was a period when nature was the predominant theme and nature writing was in full bloom, but this era of glorifying nature and return to nature slowly faded away due to the advancement of industrialization.

Presently, we live in a world, in words of Pramod.K.Nayar “increasingly lost to pollution, contamination and industry sponsored bio-disaster. It is now a truism to say that mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind.” (241) Literature reflects its age’s views on nature conspicuously and the study of literature in relation to physical environment is as old as recorded literature. In the pursuit of material profits man has cornered his moral and ethical responsibility towards his environment, keeping this issue in mind today many literary critics sought for a better means of examining and analyzing cultural texts dealing with environment. Like many other text oriented theories there was need for a legitimate

and relevant theory which could focus primarily on modes of representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts. A theory was required which could particularly pay attention to attitudes towards nature and other non-human aspects of environment.

**Ecocriticism** originated as a theory in 1980s with a predominant purpose of a microscopic view of a cultural text in context to its dealing with nature. The word ‘Ecocriticism’ first appeared in William Rueckert’s essay titled ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’ in 1978. In this essay he suggested “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.” Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm included Rueckert’s essay in their edited volume *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). In 1989 Western Literature Association meeting, Glotfelty had urged literary critics to develop an ecological approach to literature. At the same time Glen Love delivered a speech titled ‘Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism.’ Since that meeting in 1989 the usage of the term ‘Ecocriticism’ gained currency. In 1992 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established along with its journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in 1993.

The two works which officially heralded ‘Ecocriticism’ were *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. In this ground breaking work, Buell offers four criteria for determining whether a text is environmental: first, “the non-human environment is present not merely as framing device”; second, “the human interest is not the only legitimate interest”; third, “human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation”; and fourth, “there is some sense of the environment as a process.”

A basic definition of Ecocriticism was given by Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996):

Simply put, ecocriticism the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Introduction xviii)

Another striking feature is, as Terry Gifford states that “Ecocriticism is concerned not only with the attitude to nature expressed by the author of a text, but also with its patterns of interrelatedness, both between the human and the nonhuman, and between the different parts of the non-human world.”(5).

Pramod.K.Nayar explains Ecocriticism as “a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with the ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches.” (241) Ecocriticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being brought on that environment by human activities. Ecocriticism seeks to explore whether in a cultural text, environment is treated with debilitating attitude or it has been glorified. Indian writing in English is an area on which ecocriticism has been applied only sporadically.

Ecocriticism has emerged as a profound literary theory emphasizing particularly on ecology and literature connection. Currently ecocriticism is in full swing and reading literature in context to ecology, renders an ecological bend of mind in students of literature thus inculcating a sense of environmental concern and also shapes their outlook towards their surrounding physical environment.

The basic tenets of ecocriticism entail the rediscovery of nature writing texts, the study of nature representation in literature and it rejects the notion of cultural and linguistic construction of nature. The ecocritics try to ask the questions like “How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does physical setting play in the plot of this novel?” (introduction xix)

Cheryll Glotfelty takes up Elaine Showalter’s model of three developmental stages of feminist criticism and draws three analogous stages in Ecocriticism:

- The first stage in feminist criticism, the “images of women” stage is concerned with representations, concentrating on how women are portrayed in canonical literature . . . Analogous efforts in ecocriticism study how nature is represented in literature.
- Showalter’s second stage in feminist criticism, the women’s literary tradition stage . . . it rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders literature by women. In ecocriticism, similar efforts are being made to recuperate the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing.
- Third stage is theoretical phase... drawing on a wide range of theories to raise fundamental questions about the symbolic construction of gender and sexuality within literary discourse. Analogous work in ecocriticism includes examining the symbolic construction of species. (introduction xxiv)

In UK its equivalent is called **Green Studies**. Jonathan Bate, as Cheryll Glotfelty in USA, can be rightly called the pioneer of British ecocriticism with the publication of *Romantic Ecologies: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and *The Green Studies Reader* is the British variant of the seminal anthology of essays as *The Ecocriticism Reader* in America. British version of ecocriticism, or green studies, takes its bearing from the British Romantics of the 1790s.

Ecocriticism as it is now in USA, as Peter Barry puts in, “takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose works celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).” (BT 249)

**Deep Ecology** is also a related field, which emphasises on the inherent value of all living forms. The term ‘Deep Ecology’ is said to have coined by Arne Naess in 1972. Deep Ecology claims that well being of human and non-human lives on Earth have value in themselves. We should respect that intrinsic value and not take it for granted as humans have right to live so does the other life forms on earth.

**Ecofeminism** is a very widespread and contesting branch of ecocriticism. The term ‘Ecofeminism’, is believed to be coined in 1974 by Francoise d Eaubonne. Ecofeminism argues that patriarchal system of societies have adhered to the values and beliefs which had resulted in the oppression of women and nature. Greta Gaard explains:

Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism: peace movements, labor movements, women’s healthcare, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements. Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes

oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. (1)

India is a country having diverse eco systems. In north we have the impregnable Great Himalayas, in south we have rich Nilgiri and Annamalai Hills then we have World Heritage sites like varied Western Ghats with rich vegetation and north eastern Himalayan region. Indian writers could not escape this influence in their writings. There are few contemporary Indian English writers whose works could be read under the lens of ecocriticism. Even when nature is not the predominant theme of a work, still writers amply depict environmental settings to give a backdrop against which their story develops.

**Postcolonial Ecocriticism** is a branch of ecocriticism, which as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in their work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), emphasises “the need to bring postcolonial and ecological issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist modes of social and environmental dominance. . . .” (2) This branch of ecocriticism examines how western idea of conservation in third world nations ignores the ancient indigenous cultures of the local people.

Man is incessantly exploiting his natural resources without realizing where this devastating conduct would lead him. Environmental crisis has become a major concern today and in the name of development and progress we are actually deteriorating our natural world and ecocritical analysis of a cultural text would help us understand better that how this ecocentric concern is being dealt in today’s literature as literature is a mirror of society and culture in which it is produced. As Glotfelty, in introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader* stresses, “Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support system . . . If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem. (Introduction xx-xxi)

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